

Burke & Wills: the scientific legacy of the Victorian Exploring Expedition

edited by EB Joyce and DA McCann

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The 150th anniversary of the Burke and Wills expedition and the epic journey from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria was celebrated and commemorated in 2010. Under the umbrella of the Royal Society of Victoria, the Victorian Exploring Expedition left Melbourne in August 1860 to journey to the Gulf of Carpentaria and back, with the aim of exploring the great interior of the continent to link the known areas with the unknown. It is history now that the expedition succeeded in its aim of reaching the Gulf, but failed to bring the leaders back to Melbourne. In all, seven members of the expedition lost their lives and only one man, John King, reached the Gulf and returned to Melbourne.

What is not so well known is that the exploring party left Melbourne with a second aim — to carry out scientific exploration. This book is an attempt to show what was achieved by the scientists of the exploring party despite the inadequate collecting equipment and limited scientific apparatus, the difficulties encountered during the journey and the indifference of their leader, Burke.

Three scientists were members of the exploring expedition — William John Wills, surveyor and astronomer; Hermann Beckler, medical officer and botanist; and Ludwig Becker, artist and naturalist. Editors Joyce and McCann challenge the notion that little or nothing of a scientific nature was achieved, by assembling a collection of experts to discuss every aspect of the scientists of the exploring expedition, and also of those who followed, such as Wright of the relief expedition and Howitt and Welsh of the search party.

Beginning with a succinct discussion of the Victorian Exploration Expedition by Dave Phoenix in the Introduction, there are chapters on the disciplines that were covered

by the explorers — the geology of the route, the botany, the zoology, hydrology, meteorology and the aboriginal people encountered.

Throughout, the dedication and ability of the scientists is marvelled at, particularly for the three of the exploring expedition who, through great hardships, still managed to maintain their recordings of latitude and longitude (Wills), weather observations (Wills and Beckler), country traversed, botanical collections (Beckler) and detailed artistic representations (Becker).

The book is beautifully illustrated throughout with paintings and drawings (most by Becker) and photos of plants and animals collected and now in museums.

This is a very fine book which redresses the imbalance between the hype and what was actually achieved by the Victorian Exploring Expedition. One can only wonder what would have been the result had the Royal Society Exploring Committee chosen a better man as leader of the expedition.

I have travelled through the area covered by the expedition so it was interesting to see the area through the eyes of 19th century observation and collection. Well done, Joyce and McCann, for bringing it all together and also to the authors of each chapter for highlighting the achievements of the scientists of the Burke and Wills expedition, who made such a lasting and important contribution to the body of knowledge about the natural history of the interior of Australia.

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